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Josiah Penfield

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Josiah Penfield

Research Paper
for
Historical Methods 300
Dr. Roger Warlick

Researched and Written
by
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Introduction

Josiah Penfield was born in Connecticut but spent most of his 43 years down south in Savannah. He contributed much to the city during its formative years by participating in every social, religious, and political function he could. When he died, most of his modest fortune he had worked so hard for was brilliantly distributed by him to causes which resulted in very fruitful results. Josiah was loved by many, not because of his unique business mind but because he used it to help so many.

Josiah Penfield was born in Fairfield, Conn., June 6, 1785.¹ His parents were Nathaniel Penfield and Rachel Marquand.² When Josiah was about fifteen years old, he was taken to Savannah by Isaac Marquand, his uncle, and became the shop boy and clerk in his jewelry store.³ This shop was located on the corner of Whitaker and Bryan streets and Josiah lived with Isaac's family over the store till he was finally taken into the business as Marquand, Paulding, and Penfield.⁴ Here he not only learned the craft of silversmithing, but also the intricacies of commercial life.

April 1, 1810, was the day Josiah was taken into the business as a partner.⁵ Marquand and Paulding were involved in business with other cities. Marquand spent most of his time in New York and Paulding in New Orleans.⁶ This left Josiah in control of the local business almost entirely, which was good training for the day when he would become sole proprietor of the business. During this time period, he also became involved in many public, social, and religious activities. He became a firemaster of the fire department in 1813,⁷ alderman of the city in 1819, and was on the board of managers of the Savannah Poor House and Hospital Society.⁸ He was also heavily involved with the Baptist Church in Savannah up until his death.

By 1816, both Marquand and Paulding had retired from the business and left Josiah as sole proprietor.⁹ In 1821, he

took his cousin, Frederick Marquand, Isaac's son, into the business as a partner and named the business "J. Penfield and Company." In 1825, Frederick began his own business in New York and a fellow named Moses Eastman took Frederick's place in the business as Penfield's partner.¹⁰ The fire of 1820 destroyed the property at Whitaker and Bryan streets, so Penfield moved to a new location on the north side of Broughton street, between Bull and Whitaker.¹¹ This was his home and place of business until his death.

Josiah was married twice during his lifetime, the first marriage ending with the death of his wife. He married Sarah B. Pettibone of Hartford, Conn. on April 26, 1813.¹² She died on Nov. 12, 1814.¹³ Sarah was probably a girlfriend Josiah had met while growing up in Connecticut. His second marriage was to Elizabeth Russell.¹⁴ This wedding took place on Dec. 23, 1823 and lasted until Josiah's death.

Josiah owned quite a bit of property, including a few slaves.¹⁵ The silversmith business he ran required skilled craftsmen, but there was also a need for a limited amount of unskilled labor which the 5 or 6 slaves he possessed carried out. He was a very religious man but apparently his business sense was at least equal to his religious values because he took advantage of owning slaves rather than abstaining from it as many religious people did.

Josiah was baptized into the membership of the First Baptist Church in Savannah in 1808.¹⁶ This marked Josiah's

lifelong involvement with the church.

On January 16, 1819, he was elected a deacon,¹⁷ and performed such services for the church as being church treasurer during the confusing financial period in which they had so many donations for the new building they were constructing.¹⁸ Having the strong business sense that he did, Josiah was perfect for the position. On numerous occasions he would remind the church of their debt and of the necessity to pay it.¹⁹ He would use the influence of "God" to urge the members to meet their financial obligations. He was a most effective a treasurer.

Although he was thoroughly involved with the financial aspects of the church, he was more involved with the church itself. He loved the church and helped it in any way he could. In the newspaper he would take out ads advertising meetings of church functions so as to spur public involvement with the church.²⁰ Often church meetings would be held in his own home when they had no place else to meet.²¹ When the church was in search of a pastor, he would sometimes preside over the church meetings in order to help hold the congregation together.²² He also was very active in helping to find a new pastor.²³ Josiah's dedication to the church gained him the love of the congregation. When Josiah began to show signs of the sickness that would eventually take his life, the congregation showed its concern. From the first absence of Josiah, caused by the illness, there is an entry in

the church records which states that the congregation prayed for him in their closing prayers.²⁴ This first mentioning of his sickness was in May of 1825. The next year, on April 1, his wife, Elizabeth was accepted into the congregation.²⁵ Josiah's sickness may have moved them both even closer to God and the church. Another sign of this is that he began donating money to the church.²⁶ With failing health, Josiah took a trip to England in 1826 in hopes of finding some type of treatment which might cure or at least lessen the terrible state of health he was in.²⁷ The disease he was suffering from, tuberculosis, nevertheless continued to progress.²⁸ Knowing that his days were numbered, he returned to his father's house in Rye, New York where he stayed a short time and died. It was Sept. 12, 1828.²⁹ In his obituary, the Georgian wrote, "his loss will be deplored by an extensive circle of relations and friends to whom he was much endeared."³⁰ Frederick Marquand, his cousin, wrote: "I was with him in his last sickness; his death was as his life; calm, peaceful, and trustful."³¹

Josiah included many charity organizations in his will. The will was so charitable that the church recorded it in their official records.³²

Most of Josiah's will, other than family, was oriented towards religious causes. He left money in a trust to be used for the erection of a new church, money for the current pastor's library, (demonstrating his concern for education),

money for the American Bible Society, the Baptist General Convention and the Baptist General Tract Society.³³ Probably his most important and long range effective bequeathals were to the Penfield Seamens' Chapel and to what is now Mercer University.

The last thing that Josiah included in his will was the stipulation that any monies left over after the payment of the rest of the will had been executed were to be donated in a trust held by his executors to be used for the erection of a house for the religious worship of seamen in the city of Savannah.³⁴ I had a short interview with Mr. Umbright who now manages this organization that Penfield originated. The name of the organization is now the "International Seamens House," but it still primarily performs the function that Josiah intended it to. Mr. Umbright informed me that the original name was the Penfield Mariners' Chapel. In 1843 the Savannah Port Society took charge of the chapel.³⁵ The chapel later changed locations and became the Mariners' Bethel. The chapel continued to evolve with its names and locations, but always kept the religious worship of seamen as its top priority.

Another remarkable organization that Josiah's will helped to create is Mercer University. Josiah left \$2,500.00 to the Georgia Baptist Convention for the purpose of "educating pious young men for the Gospel Ministry."³⁶ This money was left to them under the condition that they would match it. The convention got busy with fund raising projects and raised the

money.³⁷ Josiah knew how to get the most out of any kind of financial deal. In 1833 Mercer Institute was opened at Penfield, Ga. by the Ga. Baptist Convention with thirty-nine young men enrolled, seven of whom were preparing for the gospel ministry.³⁸ The village in which this organization was first started was given the name of Penfield in honor of Josiah.³⁹ The school later moved to Macon where it is located today.

Of all of the organizations that Josiah was associated with, it is a wonder that his name hasn't popped up more often in the history of Savannah. Just as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were involved with so much of the early history of our country, Josiah was involved with the early history of Savannah.

Among some of the various functions Josiah was associated with were: He was a member of the Board of Health for Darby Ward, a member of the Board of Managers of the Chatham Dispensary; he was one of six appointed by the Justices of the Inferior Court to distribute the poor funds, was a member of the Grand Jury which presented grievances concerning the state of the city and also acted as attorney for absent people, as administrator of estates, and assignee for bankrupts. He was secretary and director of the New England Society of Ga., one of the incorporators of the insurance company of the city of Savannah, director of the bank of the state of Ga., and chairman of a committee to solicit subscriptions to employ a

competent engineer to report on a canal to connect the Savannah River with the Ocmulgee, Oconee, and Ogeechee Rivers.⁴⁰

This list gives some idea of Josiah's energy, industry, and ability, as well as his devotion to his city and the people within it which needed his services. I hope Savannah never forgets this man. There is a collection of some of his silver at the historic Davenport House in Savannah and also there is a plaque embedded into the sidewalk at the place where his business was located on Broughton Street. Maybe traces of him such as these will inspire Savannahians to remember him.

The following photograph is of some flatwear that was made by Josiah Penfield. The photo was taken in the historic Davenport House in Savannah.



Notes

- ¹Manuscript Files, Ga. Historical Society, Call #613, Item #1.
- ²Manuscript Files, Ga. Historical Society, Call #613, Item #2.
- ³"Silversmiths of Georgia." Barton, Cutter, pg. 98.
- ⁴Manuscript Files, Ga. Historical Society, Call #613, Item #2.
- ⁵Silversmiths of Georgia. Barton, Cutter, pg. 90.
- ⁶"Silversmiths of Georgia." Barton, Cutter, pg. 99
- ⁷History of Savannah City Government, Thomas Gamble, page 489.
- ⁸Savannah Morning News, Nov. 12, 1950, Georgia Historical Society (Bibliographies).
- ⁹"Silversmiths of Georgia." Barton, Cutter, pg. 98.
- ¹⁰Manuscript Files, call #613, item #2.
- ¹¹Savannah Morning News, Nov. 12, 1950. Georgia Historical Society (Bibliographies).
- ¹²Marriage Records, Chatham County Court House, book 1806-1851, pg. 175.
- ¹³"Silversmiths of Georgia." Barton, Cutter, pg. 99.
- ¹⁴Marriage Records, Chatham County Court House, book 1806-1851, pg. 177.
- ¹⁵Tax Records 1824, Savannah, GA. Georgia Historical Society.
- ¹⁶"A History of Mercer University," pg. 40.
- ¹⁷"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia." Lafar, Vol. II, pg. 444.
- ¹⁸"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia." Pg. 530.
- ¹⁹"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia." Lafar, pg. 582.
- ²⁰Colonial Museum and Daily Gazette, 1817 2/10, pg. 3, Col. 1.

- ²¹"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga." Lafar, Vol.II,
pg. 606.
- ²²"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga." Vol. II, pg. 606.
- ²³"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga." Lafar, Vol. II,
pg. 584.
- ²⁴"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga." Lafar, pg. 597.
- ²⁵"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga." Lafar, pg. 610.
- ²⁶"The Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga." Lafar, pg. 611.
- ²⁷Manuscript files, call #613, item #2.
- ²⁸"Silversmiths of Georgia." Barton, Cutter, pg. 99.
- ²⁹Manuscript files, call #613, item #2.
- ³⁰Georgian 1828, 9/23, pg. 3, col. 2.
- ³¹Manuscript files, call #613, item #1.
- ³²Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia. Lafar, pg. 639,
Vol. III.
- ³³Will, Chatham County Court House, Microfilm, pg. 716.
- ³⁴Will, Chatham County Court House, Microfilm, pg. 717.
- ³⁵Savannah Port Society Records. Georgia Historical
Society., 1843.
- ³⁶Will, Chatham County Court House, Microfilm, pg. 717.
- ³⁷Savannah Morning News, Nov. 12, 1950. Georgia
Historical Society (Bibliographies).
- ³⁸Savannah Morning News, Nov. 12, 1950. Georgia
Historical Society (Bibliographies).
- ³⁹"History of Mercer University," pg. 40.
- ⁴⁰"Silversmiths of Savannah, Georgia." Barton,
Cutter, pg. 99.

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- Marriage Records, Chatham County Court House, book 1806-1851.
- Tax Records 1820-27, Savannah, GA. Georgia Historical Society.
- Census, 1820, Savannah, GA. Georgia Historical Society.
(Was not indexed, therefore could not locate).
- Will, Chatham County Courthouse, Microfilm Document 715-749.
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1843.
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- Silversmiths of Georgia, Barton, Cutter.
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- Savannah Port Society Records. 1843, Georgia Historical Society.
- Deeds, Chatham County Courthouse: Books and page numbers;
II pg. 4, II pg. 501, kk pg. 112, LL pg. 141, mm pg.
447, 00 pg. 463, pp. 542, EE pg. 506, hh pg. 376.
- Interview with Mr. Umbright, Manager of "International
Seamen's House" in Savannah, Georgia.